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AUTHOR Crowell, Michael
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ABSTRACT

Dialect writing in nineteenth-century America has been used as a source of evidence about popular American language and culture. Works employing dialect have been studied as documents embodying perceptions of the relation between character, role, and moral values on the one hand, and speech variety on the other. Critics have noticed the difference between the pompous narration in many of the works and the colorful dialect of the characters in them. One study of the dime novel centered on the development of the American hero and demonstrated the improtance of dialect as an indicator of social standing and moral worth in the popular world view found in dime novels. By shifting attention to the varieties of language used in dime novels one can gain insight into attitudes toward language in its social setting. The conspicuous use of exaggerated varieties of English apparently indicates the importance attached to variation by both authors and the reading public. This paper analyzes the relation between the varieties of the dialect used in one dime novel and judgments about the origin, roles, and moral worth of its characters. The popularity of these books suggests that such an analysis can add an historical perspective to the understanding of current attitudes toward languages. (Author/AMH)

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Role and Variety in Popular American Fiction: The Case of the Dime Novel

Michael Crowell

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When John Russell Bartlett first got the idea for his Dictionary of Americanisms, he was (I quote his MS "Autobiography") "travelling in a canal boat from Utica west, on the way to visit my father at Lake Vincent. I amused myself in reading a late work in which the vulgar language of the United States abounded. Being much amused with the strange words and expressions, I marked them on the margin of the book, and on my return to New York noted them down in an interleaved copy of Pickering's Vocabulary."[1] He followed this up with Crockett Almanacs and Southwestern humor, and finally found himself with "sufficient to make a volume much larger than that of Pickering." Since that time students of American English have continued to be interested in dialect fiction of all kinds, It has been studied for accuracy of the dialects portrayed and searched for clues to the speech of earlier days. The materials available are plentiful, if not always linguistically accurate, and from the Southwestern humorists, contributors to William T. Porter's Spirit of the Times, and the Crockett Almanacs through the local color movement and the dime novel, they mirror popular attitudes toward a variety of aspects of the national life, including attitudes toward the English language and its American varieties.

One characteristic of much of this writing is the often noticed exaggeration of the language of both the narrator and the character or characters who speak the author's version of local nonstandard American English. Examples are plentiful; a short passage from T. B. Thorpe's famous

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"The Big Bear of Arkansas" will illustrate the point. The frontiersman is at the end of his story of the big bear:

> 'Perhaps, he had heard of my preparations to hunt him the next day, so he jist come in, like Capt. Scott's coon, to save his wind to grunt with in dying; but that ain't likely. My private opinion is, that the bar was an unhuntable bar, and died when his time come.'
>
> When the story was ended, our hero sat some minutes with his auditors in a grave silence; I saw there was a mystery to him connected with the bear whose death he had just related, that had evidently made a strong impression on his mind. It was also evident that there was some superstitious awe connected with the affair, --a feeling common with all 'children of the wood,' when they meet with anything out of their everyday experience.[2]

I quote this passage, in spite of the relative mildness of the two varieties spoken, because it embodies not only the linguistic difference between the genteel frame narrator and the storyteller, but the condescension of the former in his comment on the "awe" felt by "all 'children of the woods'" as well. As James Cox has pointed out, most writers in this mode tried to set up distance between a refined gentleman of a narrator and the tough, clever, but unrefined hero. And, according to Cox, "The gentleman became more and more foppish and effete as the frontiersman threatened more and more to take over the narrative. The result was a language which, in the hands of the best of these writers, became the means of discovering a New World humor."

Later writers capitalized on this bifurcation as a mechanism for achieving humor, and Mark Twain, as Henry Nash Smith has convincingly argued, used it as a means of embodying "two ways of viewing the world." Smith quotes Santayana's famous essay, "The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy," in which he characterizes America as a "country with two mentalities," one old and genteel, the other new and boisterous.[3] Twain,

like the humorists before him, used the split to satirize the genteel, but in my reading of most of the writers, including Mark Twain, there is an ambivolence of attitude that is seldom resolved. The reader experiences a feeling of distance from both the narrator and the frontier hero which manages to coexist with an attraction toward both. The feelings extend to the language, and writers like Thorpe convey a sense of the delights of the nonstandard dialect at the same time that it is clear that neither narrator nor reader would want to be heard talking that way.

These nineteenth-century stories thus embody in a fairly simple way what we might today, with Fishman, call "societal patterning of variation in verbal interaction."[4] One variety of the language is maintained by each speaker: there is no variation in the speech of any one character. Given the shortness of most of the stories, this is perhaps not significant, but even in our great masterpiece of dialect fiction, Huckleberry Finn, which contains, as the author takes pains to point out, a selection of different dialects, individual characters do not vary their speech a great deal.

But writers in our own day are sometimes able to achieve a more sophisticated way of using dialect, as Richard Gunter has nicely shown to be the case in Warren's All the King's Men. Itself a gain in sophistication, Gunter's analysis deals, among other things, with what he calls linguistic chameleonism, "a conscious attempt to tailor one's speech so that it meets and blends with the level of speech of one's interlocutor."[5] The same phenomenon is being increasingly studied by sociolinguists, and it is fair to say that our understanding of the part role relationships play in the way we speak has increased greatly in the last decade and a half. It is the variation of speech of a single speaker, as well as between speakers, that I want to look at in a dime novel.

Why the dime novel, which the kindest of critics would call fifth-rate literature? First, simply because it is fifth rate and may therefore better mirror the general culture out of which it springs. Second, dime novels were published in tremendous quantities, and can be assumed to have had a readership that included a very large proportion of the populace. Henry Nash Smith, who used dime novels in his study of the western hero, gives the best explanation:

> Fiction produced [with the extraordinary speed characteristic of dime novel writers] virtually takes on the character of automatic writing. The unabashed and systematic use of formulas strips from the writing every vestige of the interest usually sought in works of the imagination; it is entirely subliterary. On the other hand, such work tends to become an objectified mass dream, like the moving pictures, the soap operas, or the comic books that are the present day equivalents of [these] stories. The individual writer abandons his own personality and identifies himself with the reveries of his readers. It is the presumably close fidelity of [the] stories to the dream life of a vast inarticulate public that renders them valuable to the social historian and the historian of ideas.[6]

It is this process of objectification of dimly felt ideals that makes dime novels interesting: far from realistic, they may nonetheless embody widely -- held views about how life should be and, to get to the point, how language should be used.

The dime novel was born in 1860, when Erasmus Beadle published the first of the genre and founded the house of Beadle and Adams in New York. From that time until the early years of the twentieth century, Beadle and a growing number of competitors turned out, according to one rough estimate, several billion copies. Beadle and Adams alone, in the thirty five years of its existence, published more than 7,500 different novels.[7]

And this leads me to an important caveat: my use of the generic here must be taken only half seriously. Even among the few dime novels I have read there is great diversity. Writers each had their own formulas and subject matter. Some were western, some detective (these could overlap), some humorous. One series was devoted to a young man who invented things. Horatio Alger stories were best-sellers. Some were pure fiction; others claimed, like the series on Buffalo Bill, to have the real truth behind them, though this seems hardly ever to have been substantially the case. Thus, in picking out one novel for closer scrutiny, I can certainly not claim that what I find is present in all. In fact it definitely is not.

The novel I want to discuss is in the Deadwood Dick series written for Beadle by Edward L. Wheeler, who styled himself a "sensational novelist" on his professional letterhead. Its title is the cumbersome Deadwood Dick, The Prince of the Road or, The Black Rider of the Black Hills. Just about everything in the story is exaggerated, from the bar room fight in which "gallons of blood have made the floor slippery and reeking, so that it is difficult to retain one's footing," to the recuperative powers of the hero, Deadwood Dick, who receives an incredible number of knife and gunshot wounds and is twice left for dead, but who snaps back to life with amazing rapidity when the story must continue. Its plot is contrived and complex, featuring two cases of double identity and a miraculous intertwining of the lives of all the characters at the end. The language of the characters and the narrator is similarly exaggerated.

And this exaggeration of language, consisting as it does of great leaps from a pompous version of formal standard English to the misspelled, strangely pronounced, quaintly poetic speech of the rustic comic character, may well mirror the linguistic expectations of a large reading public.

Labov has noted that "lower-middle-class speakers have the greatest tendency toward linguistic insecurity [which is] shown by the very wide range of stylistic variation"[8] they use. The kinds of variation used in this dime novel suggest that its lower and lower-middle-class readers may have felt an even greater insecurity and thus imagined a world in which such linguistic extremes were appropriate. A closer examination of the novel gives a better idea of just what was involved.

The plot, as I have implied, defies succinct synopsis, but it is important to know that Ned Harris and Deadwood Dick are one and the same person, as are Fearless Frank and Justin McKenzie. The latter has in fact married Anita Harris, the hero's sister, but, for complicated reasons, both sister and hero think he has tricked her and thus ruined her honor. This is set right at the end. Ned Harris comes across a young man newly arrived in the mining country of the Black Hills, one Harry Redburn, who ends up marrying Alice Terry, whom Fearless Frank (Justin McKenzie) has saved from Sitting Bull early in the story. By breathtaking coincidence, the comic character of the story, Walsingham Nix, turns out to be Alice Terry's father, and the two are reunited near the end.

The relationship between the two, which apparently existed for a long period, since they instantly recognise each other when they meet, hardly prepares us for the way they each speak. Walsingham Nix, the rustic miner, introduces himself at one point in these words, "Sit down, marm, sit down, an' I'll perceed ter divest myself uv w'at little infermation I've got stored up in my noddle. Ye see, mum, my name's Walsingham Nix, at yer sarvice--Walsingham bein' my great, great grandad's fronticepiece, while Nix war ther hind-wheeler, like nor w'at a he-mule ar' w'en hitched ter a 'schooner.'" Nix's daughter, Alice Terry, speaks the same decorous variety

of English that the narrator and most of the important characters speak, for she ends up marrying Harry Redburn and cannot therefore be tainted by any other way of speaking. Smith saw the same pattern in a story by Edward Willett, another Beadle author: " . . . the story exemplifies an interesting principle which often operates in the Beadle series--and which indeed has its precedents in Cooper: namely, that both the sons and daughters of parents who speak a pronounced dialect are themselves free of dialect if they are involved in a love affair. The belief that no one is suitable to conduct a sentimental courtship unless he speaks a pure English is very strong; strong enough, in fact, to upset the normal processes by which children acquire the speech of the families and communities in which they grow up."[9]

This characteristic is interesting in itself, suggesting as it does the quasi sanctity of what the rhetorics of the day called "present, national, and reputable use"--in practical terms, the formal standard. A related phenomenon is an abrupt switching of code on the part of Ned Harris. He and Harry Redburn are being chased by a large gang of toughs, and are aided by a seeming youth who then disappears:

> "Who was that chap?" asked Redburn, not a little bewildered.
> "That?--why that's Calamity Jane!"
> "Calamity Jane? What a name."
> "Yes, she's an odd one. Can ride like the wind, shoot like a sharpshooter, and swear like a trooper . . . ."
> "But is it not a woman?"
> "Reckon 'tain't nothin' else."
> "God forbid that a child of mine should ever become so debased and--"
> "Hold! there are yet a few redeeming qualities about her. She was ruined--" and here a shade dark as a thundercloud passed over Ned Harris' face--"and set adrift upon the world, homeless and friendless; yet she has bravely fought her way through the storm . . . [and] her character

> has not suffered blemish since the day a foul wretch stole away her honor!"
>
> "What is her real name?"
>
> "I do not know . . . ."

What of course is surprising about this little conversation is the extent of the linguistic switch, made by Ned in a few seconds, from "Reckon 'tain't nothin' else." to "I do not know." Setting and interlocutor remain the same. Only the subject changes. In short, when it is question of the honor of a woman, only the same stiff linguistic purity that lovers need will do.

The same principle holds with other topics. Harry Redburn, for example, falls from linguistic purity only once, and then the fall is quickly explained by the narrator, since Harry is soon to marry Alice Terry. Possibly dangerous visitors have stumbled upon a secret hideaway in the mountains:

> "I will now go forward and hold parley," said Harry, as he wrapped a kerchief about the muzzle of his rifle-barrel. "If you see me fall, you can calculate that it's about time for you to sling in a chunk of your lip."
>
> He had fallen into the habit of talking in an illiterate fashion, since his association with [Walsingham Nix].
>
> "All right," assented the old locater; "ef they try ter salt ye, jes giv' a squawk, an' we'll cum a-tearin' down ter yer resky at ther rate o' forty hours a mile, more or less--consider'bly more o' less than less o' more."
>
> Redburn buckled his belt a hole tighter, looked to his two revolvers, and set out on his mission. . . . He was at a loss how to open the confab, but the scarlet kerchief saved him the trouble.
>
> "I presume I see in you one of the representatives of this concern," he said . . . as the miner came up.
>
> "You do," replied Redburn bowing stiffly. "I am an owner or partner in this mining enterprise, which, until your sudden advent, has been a secret to the outside world."

Redburn's fall is only momentary, of course, and the diction with which he begins and ends is very different from his short "illiterate" imitation of Nix. But how do we account for the slip, whether or not explained by the

narrator? The answer, I think, lies in what is going on. When Redburn uses Nixian slang, he is expressing a kind of devil-may-care bravado that the good in the novel are often allowed. When he is making plans or confronting a potential enemy, the seriousness of the occasion demands a variety of English that is stiffer than his bow. Much the same kind of shift occurs when Deadwood Dick, whose throat has recently been cut, apparently without serious damage to his health, asks, "Have you a glass of water handy, Cap? This jab in the gullet makes me thirsty," and then proceeds to explain to the assembled company, "Ladies and gentlemen, a little tragedy is about to take place here soon, and it becomes necessary that I should say a few words explaining what cause I have for hanging these two wretches whom you see here."

In short, exaggerated formal speech is appropriate to matters of high seriousness--romance, negotiation, justice--and it makes little difference who is speaking (the women and the comic character excepted) and whom he is speaking to. Physical setting and social situation have almost nothing to do with the variety of English used, except that men addressing women tend toward the formal. The fact that the humorous character violates this rule adds to his effectiveness, and countless readers, conditioned to expect a correlation between high seriousness and formal speech, must have chuckled at Walsingham Nix's happy unconcern for the linguistic proprieties of the Deadwood Dick dime novel.

I should also mention the narrator of the story, whose language seems carefully tailored to meet these needs, though it steers a course between the great extremes in speech of some of the characters. Wheeler apparently wanted a narrator whose voice would reflect the genteel viewpoint, but would give hints, at least, of realism and familiarity with the life of the

mining towns. A number of footnotes announce the truth of some action or description, and a smattering of slang words (e.g. "confab" in reference to the meeting between Redburn and the intruders), dropped into the narration at fairly regular intervals, give the narrator's speech a touch of the Black Hills miner. Sometimes these words are set off by quotation marks, as if to protect the narrator from too much contamination. Indeed, Wheeler was not above using quotation marks within the speeches of his characters for the same purpose, though his use of the device is random and inconsistent.

This brief sketch of one dime novel is a scratch on the surface of what can be done. With thousands of titles available in collections of dime novels, the opportunity exists to explore the ways in which the many authors used language varieties to signal moral and social concerns. In the Wheeler stories at least, the language mirrors the exaggerated split between the high and low that seems to characterize most nineteenth-century popular dialect writing. But the literary uses to which the split are put have, I believe, changed. The consistency of each character's speech has partly given way to a concern for the appropriateness of the variety to the subject at hand.

It is tempting to suggest hypotheses to explain this change. Certainly the Wheeler dime novel embodies a superficial morality that many earlier stories lacked, and the code switching I have described helps to emphasize this. It may be that a reverse process is at work as well, and that formality and propriety in language have come to be more seriously valued in the public mind, so that their connection with high seriousness would seem appropriate to the general public that bought the novels in such large quantities. Whatever the reasons, light can be shed on them by further

study. The effort might be well worth making, since for all their inaccuracy and exaggeration, the dime novels are surely somehow connected with the expectations of a large majority of Americans living a hundred years ago. We might thus gain an historical perspective with which to view the many and important studies of language attitudes that are being undertaken today.

FOOTNOTES

1 John Russell Bartlett, MS "Autobiography" in the John Carter Brown Library, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, p. 43.

2 Reprinted in Walter Blair, ed., Native American Humor (New York:American, 1937), p. 348.

3 Henry Nash Smith, Mark Twain: The Development of a Writer (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1962), p. 2.

4 Joshua Fishman, Sociolinguistics: A Brief Introduction (Rowley, Mass: Newbury House, 1970), p. 40.

5 Richard Gunter,"Dialect and Diction in the Novel" in David L. Shores and Carole P. Hines, Papers in Language Variation (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1977), p. 266.

6 Henry Nash Smith, Virgin Land:The American West as Symbol and Myth (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1970), pp. 91-2.

7 E. F. Bleiler, ed., Eight Dime Novels (New York: Dover, 1974), p. vii.

8 William Labov, Sociolinguistic Patterns (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), p. 117.

9 Smith, Virgin Land, p. 98.